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Good
News
from
the
Pews

Melissa
Schmidt



*The Church that
Encourages and
Builds Up Each Other*

“The Church that Encourages and Builds Up Each Other”
July 9, 2023 | 6th Sunday after Pentecost
Melissa Schmidt | 1 Thessalonians 5:5-14

Today’s Scripture reading comes from the Apostle Paul’s first letter the church in Thessalonica—1 Thessalonians 5:4-15. To understand these verses, it helps to know what was happening in this city when the letter was written. Scholars believe that Paul wrote this letter roughly 20 years after Jesus’s death and resurrection, making it the oldest surviving letter Paul wrote to any Christian church.¹ At this time, Thessalonica was part of the Roman Empire, with a population of 200,000.² It was the capital city of the Roman Province of Macedonia and was a strategically important trade center between Europe and Asia. Government and politics were especially important to Thessalonians because the Roman Empire had made Thessalonica a free city, able to govern itself.³

Paul wrote this letter to encourage new believers in Thessalonica because they were suffering persecution. Believing in Jesus was political dangerous. Paul also responded to three concerns that were troubling these new believers. The first concern related to believers who were still being influenced by paganism. The second concern related to their fear that deceased church members were not going to heaven because they had died before Jesus returned. And the third concern related to believers who had quit their jobs and were waiting idly for Jesus’s return.⁴

Last weekend, I was encouraged at a local swim meet. All three of my boys are swimmers. In the summer, they swim for one of Madison’s All-City Swim League teams. I usually find another Covenant family whose children are swimming for the

¹ *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. XI (Abingon Press: Nashville, 2000), 681-82, and *Britannica, Letters of Paul to the Thessalonians*, available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/letters-of-Paul-to-the-Thessalonians>.

² Wallace, Daniel B. *1 Thessalonians: Introduction, Outline, and Argument*, available at: <https://bible.org/seriespage/13-1-thessalonians-introduction-outline-and-argument>.

³ *Wikipedia, Thessaloniki*: available at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thessaloniki>.

⁴ *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2011), 1448.

opposing team, so in between my boys' swimming events, I connect with these families. Last weekend's swim meet brought about one such opportunity. I found myself being encouraged as I talked with the other Covenant mother, chatting about our family and life as busy moms. There is something marvelously encouraging about watching Covenant families out and about in the community, connecting over what is going on in their lives, and supporting them in their swimming events.

In that same swim meet, one of my boys was also encouraged, but in a completely different way. He swam the individual medley, where one swims all four strokes – backstroke, breaststroke, butterfly, and freestyle. Last week's swim meet was only the second time that he had ever swum the IM at a meet. When he got out of the pool, he was absolutely crushed because he thought he made a mistake and was disqualified (for the record, he didn't DQ).

My son went back to our tent and just sat. As he sat in stone silence, another teammate came over. He got my son to stand up and the two somehow figured out how to buy some candy. They goofed around a bit, and by the time it was my son's next event, his attitude had changed. His head was back in the swim meet, and he shaved 13.85 seconds off his breaststroke!

Encouragement is a defining feature of the church. In the New Testament alone, the word "encourage," or some form thereof, is used 45 times.⁵ Someone is either encouraging or being encouraged by other Christians. In the Scripture reading for today, we hear the Apostle Paul giving his own encouragement to the church in Thessalonica and then directing EVERYONE in the church to encourage and build up each other. In verse 11, Paul tells us that ALL believers, not just pastors, elders, or deacons, are called to engage in the ministry of encouragement. Mutual encouragement is a fundamental ingredient of the Christian community. Having been encouraged myself by Covenant members, I believe encouragement from other Christians is a gift from God.

You see, no one is immune from strife. At any given moment, everyone has at least one problem. Some problems we share with others; some problems we keep private. I'm not a betting person, but if I was, I would bet that each person listening to this sermon, either here in person or online, is silently struggling with at least one problem that no one knows about. Sometimes our struggles are so difficult, or so prolonged, or

⁵ Kohlenberger, John R. III, *The NIV Exhaustive Bible Concordance* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2015), 345.

so frequent that they cause us to question our faith.

The kind of encouragement that God calls us to give to each other is not based upon specific words. It is not a set of empty phrases telling others that everything will be ok. It is not solving someone's problems, or critiquing what that person did wrong. For example, do you remember Job's friends? They sat with him in silence for a whole week to comfort him. However, when the week was over, they proceeded to critique his life, accusing him of doing something to deserve his misfortunes. That is NOT encouragement. Job's friends not only made his life miserable, they also angered God. So don't be like Job's friends! Christians are not supposed to be backseat drivers in someone else's life!

In Paul's original text, the Greek word he used for "encourage" was "parakaleo," which literally means "to call to one's aid." Some Bible translations like the King James Version, use the word "comfort" instead of "encourage." This is particularly important if we are to understand God's intent for the church and the ministry of encouragement, because Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as our "Comforter." Thus, the type of encouragement that Paul is really talking about involves words or actions that are: (1) inspired out of love; (2) filled with the Holy Spirit; and (3) comfort others.

So, if God is calling each one of us to encourage and build up one another, how on earth do we do this? The answer is amazingly simple: PRAY. Just like any other ministry, the ministry of encouragement begins with PRAYER. Before you come to church, before you leave the house, when you're driving in your car, or walking down the block, pray. Pray for God's help. Ask God to open your heart and use you. Remember that God created you, God knows you, and God wants to use YOU to encourage others, even if you do not have a clue how to do so.

Encouragement works best when it is provided in RELATIONSHIPS. If you want to comfort someone, you need to know who that person is. This is a key reason the church often talks about being in fellowship with one another. We need to be in fellowship, in communion, in a relationship with one another if we are to live out God's calling to encourage each other. Maybe it's as simple as talking with another Covenant member at a swim meet. Or maybe it involves joining one of Covenant's small groups or hanging out a little bit longer in the pews, the Narthex, or Bradfield Hall. Connect with someone. If you are watching online, send a message to someone who commented in the YouTube chat box or pray for someone on the prayer list. Praying for others is a wonderful way to foster relationships.

A ministry of encouragement also requires presence – YOUR PRESENCE. Just be there in the moment. Sometimes you might sense God calling you to encourage a specific person. You might even sense words that are Spirit-led. And other times, you might have absolutely no clue that God is using you. You might have no idea that your presence is ministering to someone. Do not think that you need to come up with special words. Just be present. The good news is that you do not worry about what to do next. If you've prayed, God will show up. And God uses mistakes too. So let God do what God does – use broken people for God's purposes.

Lastly, it is important to have EMPATHY, because God might use you to encourage others who are questioning their faith. What I am about to say, I believe, is the heart of why we are ALL called to the ministry of encouragement: if we are all being completely honest with ourselves, we either personally have, or know someone else who has, felt like we are failing in our faith.

There is a beautiful discussion about this in Reverend Kathy Escobar's book *Practicing: Changing Yourself to Change the World*.⁶ In this book, she explains how people who feel like they are failing in their faith, will describe: (1) exiting their church as they knew it and then feeling like they are on the outside; (2) no longer knowing how to pray, read the Bible, or connect with God in a way that feels meaningful; (3) experiencing anger, sadness, confusion after years of certainty and clarity about their faith; (4) having broken relationships with friends and family; (5) feeling lonely and disconnected where once there was joy, purpose, and a sense of community; or (6) feeling shame that they just can't figure out God or faith.⁷ Listen to Kathy's encouraging and empathetic response:

I constantly remind people that there's no such thing as a failed faith. It might feel real, but it comes from the unhealthy binary, either/or thinking many of us were taught in rigid systems. It becomes embedded in our hearts and experience and will always give us trouble. Thinking we're either in or out, right or wrong, on God's good side or bad side, will always lead to pain and strife. Making peace with an evolving faith – that we will always be changing, growing, morphing our spirituality – is an important practice that isn't readily taught in a lot of churches.⁸

⁶ Escobar, Kathy, *Practicing: Changing Yourself to Change the World* (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2020).

⁷ Escobar, 173-174.

⁸ Escobar, 175.

Kathy Escobar continues by challenging people who are not struggling with their faith. She says you can be a “powerful source of healing for people when it comes to these issues of faith ... by *learn[ing] how to honor others’ diverse and uncertain faith stories with tenderness and care*. Let them wrestle and struggle and resist your temptation to try to fix their complex questions and doubts with simple solutions. ... Try to trust God’s work in their lives and affirm your heart for them through less words and more presence.”⁹

This. This is the kind of Spirit-led, love-filled, comforting ministry of encouragement that we are all called to provide.

Friends, today’s Good News from the Pews is this: God has called us to love each other with encouragement that is filled with the Holy Spirit and comforts our innermost being. We are already doing this, and God calls us to keep doing so. True Christian encouragement is love—we are loving our neighbor as ourselves. May we all respond to God’s calling, trusting that the Holy Spirit will use us as a blessing to encourage and build up each other. Thanks be to God.

⁹ Escobar, Ibid.